

The Black Boy Who Turned Blue:
A Reflection and Analysis of *Moonlight*

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Written by Tarell Alvin McCraney and directed by Barry Jenkins, *Moonlight* is a film distributed by A24 studios that entails a tumultuous, coming-of-age drama. The film's screenplay is pulled from McCraney's autobiography titled *In Moonlight Black Boys Look Blue*, and is divided into three acts of the main character's (Chiron) life: his youth, adolescence, and adulthood. The argument of this paper is why *Moonlight's* baptism scene in the Atlantic Ocean along the coast of Miami is pertinent to the film's development through Chiron's acceptance of his sexuality and individuality.

Perspective

To better understand the baptism scene (17:30), background will be provided to further denote symbolism for synthesis.

Chiron is the product of an abusive mother, bereft of a consistent father figure (we are not provided with his biological father's whereabouts) whom coincidentally stumbles upon Juan, a crack dealer in Miami. Juan is a broad and stoic man who takes Chiron's plight to heart: he is very evidently feminine in his mannerisms, making him an easy target for bullies. This is expounded upon in later instances of Chiron questioning Juan, in which he asks him "Am I a faggot?" at 33:52. Juan promptly responds with "No," and further goes to state that "You can be gay, but you ain't let nobody call you a faggot." Juan is thus invested in Chiron, and yearns to better his life despite the fact that he sells crack to Chiron's mother (albeit, while this scene (28:52) occurs after his baptism, it serves as an important factor in their character development). Therefore, the inclusion of the baptism scene is perhaps the highest point in Chiron's adolescence; a testament to the fact that Juan allows him into his life as a father figure, accepted for being gay, celebrated in his ancestry, and ultimately acknowledges that he is a product of

abuse and not irredeemably broken. The absence of the baptism scene would render a nonsensical script, and the entirety of the movie thus hinges on its ability to demonstrate its tenderness through a pain-stricken, crack infested Miami.

Ten Shots

The ocean baptism scene is quite intricate, and requires several instances of stopping the movie to accurately locate all of the shots as the camera's POV is underwater, often covering half of the screen. This eye-level effect is implemented to emulate the feeling as if one were at a close distance from the pair. Furthermore, we are given brief instances of close-ups, and left with a distance that lies between close-up and medium as we do not witness their waists.

Shot one begins at 17:30, and depicts Juan taking his shirt off to go swimming in the ocean, telling Chiron to "come on, man." Juan exits the screen off of the far right, and Chiron remains sitting on a bench on the left corner of the screen, apprehensive of whether or not he should go. After a few moments, Chiron gets up, and peers off into the distance. Tense music begins to play as he contemplates going for about four seconds. There is a sudden feeling of foreboding that grips the viewer whence Chiron gets into the water as we watch Chiron stare down, as if to question his own existence. At 17:57, a violin begins to play slowly, then rapidly picks up five seconds in. Nicholas Britell, the man behind the Academy Award winning score, stated in an interview that he "drags out" sounds in order to emulate a deep and somber tone, utilizing various speeds throughout the chapters of Chiron's life to keep up with his "upside-down" world (Cooper).

This scene's brilliance lies in its symmetry of presenting a baptism: Juan holds Chiron upright, his right hand resting underneath his head at 18:05, assuming a strong father figure pose.

The camera provides all natural light, making it so that this scene could not be forced under cover of darkness; neither could it be filmed as an aerial view. To do so would detract from the intimacy of the film. The camera is thus steadily tracking on Juan and Chiron, keeping any outside objects out of focus, making everything unimportant but the pair's struggle to keep themselves up in a cruel environment - the one that they are floating within, and the one they must come back to. Chiron's face is never shrouded in the baptism scene, and as he begins to let go and float on his back completely, the violin soars into a bright crescendo.

Juan demonstrates his ability to be a competent father figure in Chiron's life as he is able to congratulate him while promptly teaching him to swim "more athletic" in shot seven at 18:39. When Chiron gets the hang of it, there are a few reverse shots where we see Chiron looking at Juan for acceptance and guidance - something that he is not accustomed to. Juan thus represents a duality of parenting: a strong male figure and an almost mothering, tender figure as he does not boast like his mother, nor does he ask for anything in return.

His mother, Paula, is thus the antithesis of Teresa, Juan's Girlfriend, who claims that her home is always a place that he can feel welcome. Paula, by contrast, often does not want Chiron home so she can partake in illicit activity. She also serves as the catalyst of antagonism to Chiron's life story, in that her abuse is fueled by the very thing that gets Juan killed. It is important to take note that Paula's abuse is only truly laid out following the baptism scene, as if to say that the baptism scene thus prepares him for the trials he will later face in life. 30:10 then presents one of the more difficult instances to swallow in the film: Paula stands with a menacing pose centered in the middle of the screen, illuminated by neon pink lights in the background. She screams at an innocent Chiron, her words inaudible. Interestingly, at 1:06:26, the only time we hear Paula truly yell at Chiron (one that isn't littered with manipulative pleading for money) is

when Chiron is awakened from a dream in his adulthood, where we now know that she uttered “*Don’t look at me.*” The relevance of the dream sequence in the introduction of his adulthood thus showcases the lasting effect his mother’s abuse has had on him.

The remainder of the baptism scene is then a slowing down of tempo (which is quite literally done in the violin), as Chiron has finally learned to swim alone. The remaining twenty seconds are of Chiron swimming in the ocean, bereft of any soundtrack, simply the sound of the waves of the ocean hitting the viewer. The baptism scene does not include any fancy camera work (as opposed to the rest of the key lighting and wide angle shots of the rest of the film). While shooting a camera halfway submerged in water is difficult in retaining the correct shots, *Moonlight* makes it seem effortless.

Why These Shots Work

While this scene takes place after the baptism scene, its pertinence can only be attributed to the baptism scene’s existence. 20:25 is then a short story:

“This one time... I ran by this old, old lady, was just a runnin' and a hollerin' and cuttin' a fool, boy. And this old lady, she stop me and she say to me, 'Look at you. 19. I was a lil' bad ass too, you know.' She say, 'Look at you' and I say 'Look at you!' Then she smiled and she say, 'running around catching up all this light. In moonlight' she say, 'black boys look blue. You blue,' she say. 'That's what I'm gone call you: Blue.'”

Thus, when Chiron accepts violence (or vulnerability in violence), and goes back to school to beat up his bully, he is seen wearing a blue shirt - something he hasn’t been seen

wearing before, as Chiron often wears white or red. Blue is vulnerability. The tale that Juan relayed to Chiron is a life lesson in being vulnerable against the odds. Instances of blue are also peppered throughout the film, where Kevin, Chiron's brief lover, wears white while Chiron gets taken away by the police. The day before, Kevin had worn blue. In another instance, Kevin calls Chiron, and the room he is in is illuminated with the color blue. Water, by contrast, also represents intimacy, as he shared a scene where he was bathed in water like rebirth with Juan, had his first sexual experience near water, and then covers his face with water, looking rather somber in order to "wake" himself up to the hustler life he has chosen (1:06:55).

There is a reason why *Moonlight* has won three Oscar nominations, most notably "Best Picture," one of the most prestigious awards given. In essence, the baptism scene is therefore the heart of the movie as it helps rationalize a young man's pain and suffering into something palpable. This memory resurfaces at the end of the film at 1:46:10, in which the camera is set behind him, depicting a young Chiron looking out over the Atlantic Ocean. He looks blue against the moon, and peers out into the waves, then turns around and looks upwards - perhaps at someone taller than him, perhaps at Juan, perhaps at the rest of his life. We do not see what is behind the camera.

Works Cited

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